THE MOSAIC IN ST. CATHERINE'S MONASTERY ON MOUNT SINAI

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I

CLOSE to the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula, surrounded by steep mountains of red granite—at a height of 5,000 feet—lies the monastery which is known today as St. Catherine's.[1] It was built by the emperor Justinian late in his life on the site which had long been identified by hermits as the one where Moses spoke to the Lord in the Burning Bush. According to Procopius [2] the monastery was dedicated by Justinian to the Virgin and centuries later the name was changed to that of St. Catherine's. No photograph can capture the feeling of closeness of monastery and mountain so convincingly as the drawing which was made, in 1839, by David Roberts, a Scotsman who, in the nineteenth century, was one of the most celebrated artists of architectural views (fig. 1).[3]

Because of the monastery's remoteness in the rocky desert, far out of the way of the great trade and military routes, it has never been destroyed by a conquering army. To this lucky fate it owes the relatively good state of preservation of the church, which still has the old wooden entrance gate, its old carved wooden roof beams and most important, the old apse mosaic from the period of its founding. Of this mosaic nothing can be seen on Robert's drawing of the interior (fig. 2) which simply has a blank spot where it should be. This seems surprising in the case of a sensitive artist who usually was so careful in details of whatever he happened to draw. He himself supplied the explanation when he wrote:

> Many difficulties were thrown in my way when I attempted to make a sketch of the interior of the Chapel. The brotherhood, though kind in the extreme and though they allowed me to draw in every part of the Convent, and themselves sat for sketches and studies, yet always found some excuse whenever I proposed to make a drawing of the chapel, they had mislaid the key or some such frivolous reason. At length, I fairly took out my sketchbook during service; they could not interrupt me while engaged in their sacred duties; and thus I effected my object.

This explains why much in this picture of the interior was supplied by imagination: the profiles of



FIG. 1. St. Catherine's monastery. Lithograph after a drawing by David Roberts, 1839.

[1] A masterly bibliography on Sinai, complete until the year 1921 with 672 entries, was published by V. Beneševič, *Monumenta Sinaitica Archaeologica et Palaeographica*, Fasc. I (Leningrad, 1925). Of the more recent publications, valuable for its data gathered on the spot, I should like to mention only M. H. L. Rabino, *Le Monastère du Mont Sinai* (Cairo, 1938, publ. by the Royal Automobile Club d'Égypte).

[2] *De Aedif.* V. VIII. 4–9.

[3] *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia from Drawings made on the Spot by David Roberts.* With Historical Descriptions by George Croly and W. Brockendon, Lithographed by Louis Haghe (6 vols. London, 1842–49). The Sinai drawings are in vol. 3.



FIG. 2. Interior of the Church. Lithograph after a drawing by David Roberts, 1839.

all the arches, including the triumphal arch, are reminiscent of a Western romanesque church and all the icons in the iconostasis are without relation to the actual ones.

Roberts' difficulties were symptomatic and generations of artists and scholars met similar obstacles. This explains to a large extent why the mosaic, though known to exist, remained insufficiently and incorrectly published until very recently. Therefore, one should not judge too harshly those attempts of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, by which scholars set out to transmit some knowledge of it.

Only a few years earlier, Comte de Laborde had, in 1830, been on Mount Sinai and made a simple line drawing which at least established the most basic facts about the iconography of the mosaic (fig. 3).[4] Christ in the center of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is depicted within an aureola, surrounded by the prophets Moses and Elijah and the disciples John, Peter, and James. The framing border contains medallions of the apostles above the Transfiguration and of the sixteen prophets underneath. Two flying angels fill the spandrels of the triumphal arch together with two medallion heads whose identification raised some dispute, and the wall above, left and right of a double window, is filled with two Moses panels. Of this drawing de Laborde could proudly say that it was the first ever made, though he points out the difficulties in making it and admits the possibility of errors. Of these there are many: among them, the Christ who stands with a gesture of prayer instead of blessing in a pointed, gothisized mandorla, the angels of the triumphal arch, who in renaissance fashion cross their arms over their breast instead of holding scepter and orb, Moses at the upper left, who is depicted kneeling before the Bush and not erect,

[4] Léon de Laborde et Linant, *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée* (Paris, 1830), pp. 67–68 and pl. 20.

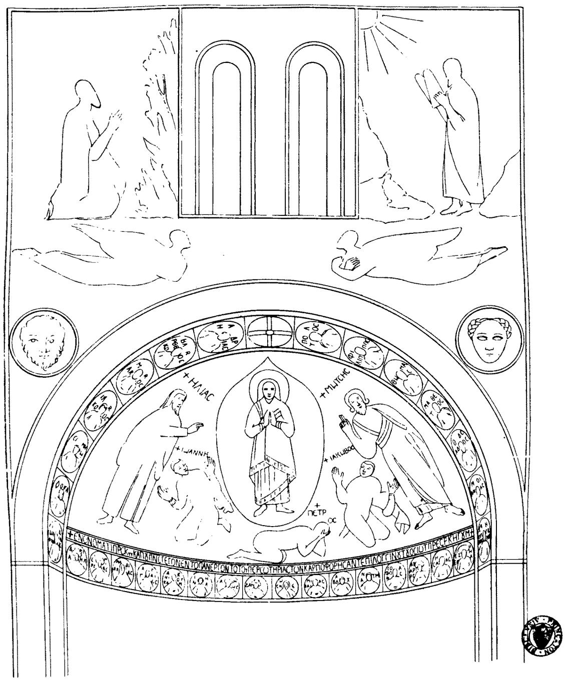


FIG. 3. Mosaic. After de Laborde, 1830.

and Moses at upper right, who receives the law in the form of two rounded stone tablets, a feature drawn from memory, as we shall see later.

When, almost half a century later, in 1877 to be precise, Raffaele Garrucci compiled his compendium of Early Christian art, which is still widely used today, he had no other source than de Laborde's drawing, whose figures and busts he merely changed into shadow images (fig. 4).[5] Thus the unpretentious drawing of de Laborde was channeled into the main stream of Early Christian iconographic studies, and with its continued use as a source, its errors also spread.[6]

At least Garrucci could have avoided some mistakes had he known the lithograph which had appeared eight years earlier in England (figs. 5*a–b*).[7] It was made by Corporal Goodwin of the Royal Engineers for a publication of the Ordnance Survey Office, which, probably because of its military sponsorship, was quite unjustifiably ignored by European scholars. This lithograph is a very considerable improvement, showing Christ correctly with a gesture of blessing in an oval mandorla, the true pose of the awakening Peter, the two angels correctly carrying scepter and orb, the upper left Moses in the proper pose of loosening his sandals, etc. The draftsman's special interest, however, is the two medallion busts of the triumphal arch, which he drew once more separately, because an old tradition, still upheld by the monks today, has it that they represent Justinian and Theodora, the monastery's founders. Yet Wilson and Palmer, who wrote the text, cast some justified doubt on this identification, although their observation that the bearded head was not unlike that of our Saviour offered no solution either.

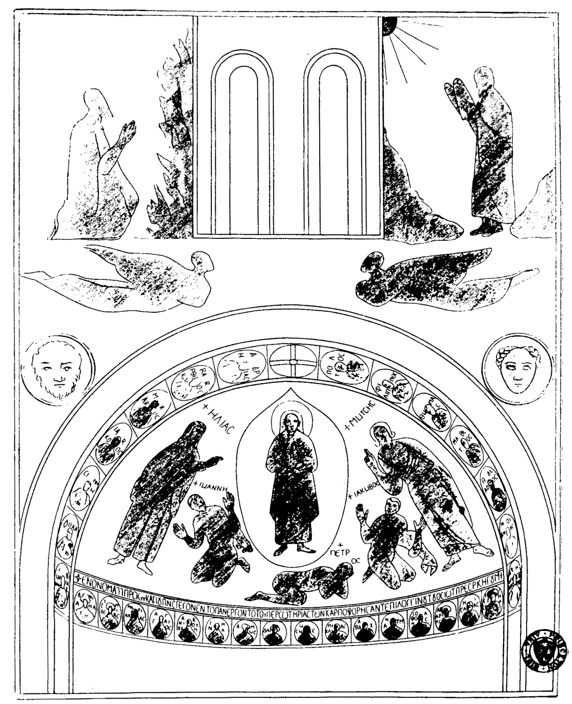


FIG. 4. Mosaic. After Garrucci, 1877.

The last lithograph, before photography took over, was made by Polivanov, who brought a drawing back to Russia, which was published by Usov in 1879 (fig. 6).[8] Usov had not been on

[5] R. Garrucci, *Storia della Arte Cristiana* **4** (Prato, 1877), pp. 78–79 and pl. 268.

[6] Another repetition of de Laborde's drawing, though confined to the Transfiguration, can be found in Rohault de Fleury, L'Evangile, *Etudes Iconographiques et Archaeologiques* **2** (Tours, 1874): p. 70 and pl. LXIII No. 1.

[7] C. W. Wilson and H. S. Palmer, *Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai* (Southampton, 1869). Lithograph by J. Ferguson after drawing by Corporal Goodwin, Royal Engineers. Lithographed at Topographical Department, War Office; printed by Vincent Brooks Day & Son, p. 205 and pl. VII, 1–4.

[8] S. A. Usov, *Mosaics in the Church of the Transfiguration in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Sinai* (in Russian, Moscow, 1879).

Sinai, and thus based his description, the first extensive one which has scientific merit, entirely on this lithograph with all the possibilities of misinterpretation inherent in its inaccuracies. Considerably more detailed than Goodwin's drawing and in many ways more faithful, it too has some misleading details, such as wreaths instead of orbs in the hands of the angels, the rosette medallion between them, etc.

After Kondakov, the founder of Byzantine Art History as a discipline in the sense we understand it today, had seen Polivanov's drawing, he raised

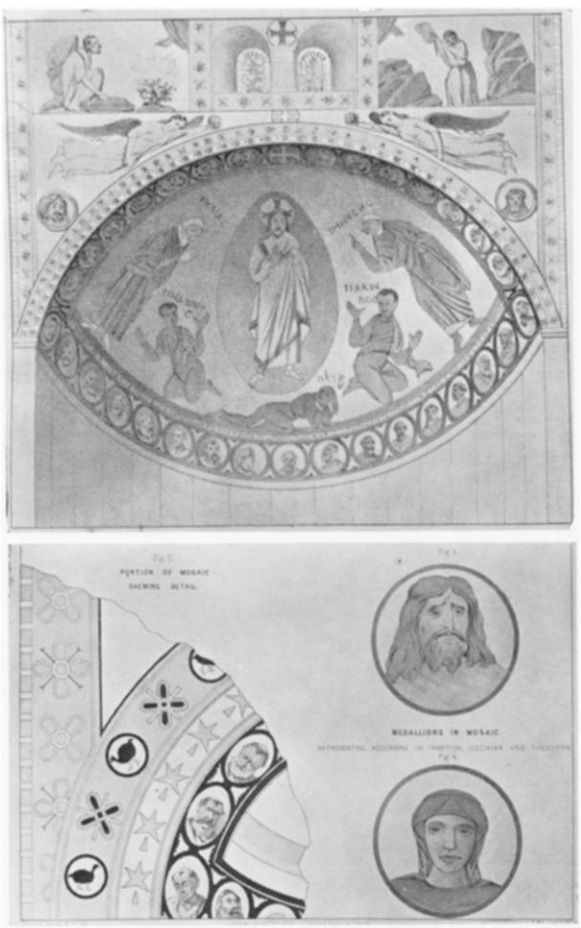


FIG. 5*a–b*. Mosaic. After Wilson and Palmer, 1869.

many critical objections to it and then decided to look for himself. In 1881 he undertook the first archaeological expedition to Mount Sinai, equipped with a camera. Alas, when a year later his report was published, supplemented by a photo album,[9] it did not contain a picture of the mosaic. Kondakov explains in his text that the photograph he attempted to make of it had turned out to be a failure. So it was that while he proudly proclaimed that he had been the first professional scholar who studied the mosaic on the spot, he was forced to use, when writing his report, Polivanov's faulty lithograph. Thus it happened that the first attempt to use stylistic criticism as a new tool in connection with the Sinai mosaic showed many flaws which were repeated by almost all later writers, who relied on the authority of Kondakov.

To mention only a few details which led Kondakov to erroneous conclusions: He describes the tablets in the hands of Moses as having rounded tops and claims that for this reason it is impossible to date them before the sixteenth century. Thus he believes that most of the upper part of the mosaic is of a later date, though probably following an old design, that the type of Moses is taken from a more recent Greek painting and that the rocks look like bad oil paintings, etc. Along these lines, the triumphal arch is also criticized. The angels hold garlands instead of crowns, he says—in fact they hold orbs—and the disk with the rose petals he calls a "miserable ornament." So he goes on arguing that also much of the triumphal arch is not old either.

When finally, in 1901, the first photograph was published by Ainalov in his basic study of the



FIG. 6. Mosaic. After Usov, 1879.

[9] N. Kondakov, *Journey to Sinai in the year 1881* (in Russian, Odessa, 1882), pp. 75 ff.



FIG. 7. Mosaic. After Ainalov, 1901.

"Hellenistic Sources of Byzantine Art" (fig. 7),[10] it was utterly insufficient for a reexamination of the mosaic. Moreover, Kondakov's verdict about the Moses scenes and the triumphal arch being either new or perhaps restored was carried over uncritically.

What the Russians, who until the First World War were leading in Byzantine art history and especially in archaeological study of Sinai, considered a major step in the understanding of the very elusive mosaic, were the photographs which Beneševič brought back to Russia just before the war and published in 1925 (fig. 8).[11] But Beneševič, who began an excellent catalogue of the manuscripts of the Sinai library, did not claim any competence as an archaeologist and so he asked Kondakov to write the descriptive text. This gave the latter the opportunity to reappraise the statements he had made after his trip almost half a century earlier, and, without reexamining the original, to make some corrections. Yet he is not quite happy with Beneševič's photos and states that still no real analysis is possible unless a new expedition with better equipment and a scaffold can solve the problem of what is old and what is restored.

Moreover, even Beneševič's expedition was unable to achieve a full photographic record. It had turned out to be impossible to make a photograph of the mosaic on the wall above the apse, and thus a watercolor picture was made (fig. 9) which, though improved still had imperfections. It is the first picture which, to mention only a small but important detail, showed the Lamb of God in the summit of the triumphal arch, though its execution still is more a memory image than a rendering of reality.

During the first half of this century, when the study of Byzantine art had made great strides, the writing on the Sinai mosaic and its reproduction was almost exclusively based on the description by Kondakov and on the inadequate photographs in Ainalov and Beneševič.[12] Only within the last fifteen years, since Sotiriou succeeded in presenting better and more detailed photographs, made during a campaign which also brought the remarkable icon collection of Sinai into the light,[13] has a wider



FIG. 8. Apse Mosaic. After Beneševič, 1925.

[10] D. V. Ainalov, *The Hellenistic Sources of Byzantine Art* (in Russian, St. Petersburg, 1901), pp. 212–213 and pl. III. English translation by E. Sobolevitch and S. Sobolevitch, edited by C. Mango, under the title "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Art," New Brunswick 1961, p. 272 and fig. 124. Here the old photograph has been replaced by one of the Alexandria–Michigan–Princeton Expedition to Mount Sinai.

[11] Beneševič, *op. cit.*, pp. 3 ff. and pls. 2–7.

[12] To mention only a few of the best known publications: Ch. Diehl, *Justinien* (Paris, 1901), fig. 107 on p. 291. O. M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford, 1911), p. 283 and fig. 225. O. Wulff, *Altchristliche und Byzantinische Kunst* **2** (1914), p. 419 and fig. 364.

[13] G. Sotiriou, Τὸ *μωσαϊκὸν τῆς* Μ*εταμορφώσεως τοῦ* Καθολι*κοῦ τῆς μονῆς τοῦ Σινᾶ*, in: *Atti dello VIII Congresso Internationale di Studi Bizantini, Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* **8**, (Rome, 1953): pp. 246 ff. and pls. LXXIV–LXXXVIII. Idem, *Icones du Mcnt Sinai* **2**, (Athens, 1958), p. 4 and pl. 6–7.

group of scholars been made aware of the Sinai mosaic.

II

I have dwelled at some length on these various scholarly efforts in order to demonstrate that it was neither lack of awareness nor negligence, but the existence of quite unusual external and internal difficulties which had, for more than a century, prevented an adequate treatment of one of the great masterpieces of Early Christian art. The break-through, which Kondakov had so ardently hoped for, came in 1958, when an American expedition, sponsored by the University of Michigan and Princeton University, and later joined by Alexandria University, went up to the monastery with an aluminum scaffold in order to investigate and photograph the mosaic at close range (fig. 10).[14]

I should like to discuss three aspects of this investigation. First, in inspecting the mosaic to determine its condition, it was soon discovered that the whole figure of Christ was detached from the wall, and because of the heavy weight of the cubes and the mortar was in danger of collapsing. The area of the detachment from the wall could be determined by tapping, and it became obvious that this process of loosening must have gone on for quite

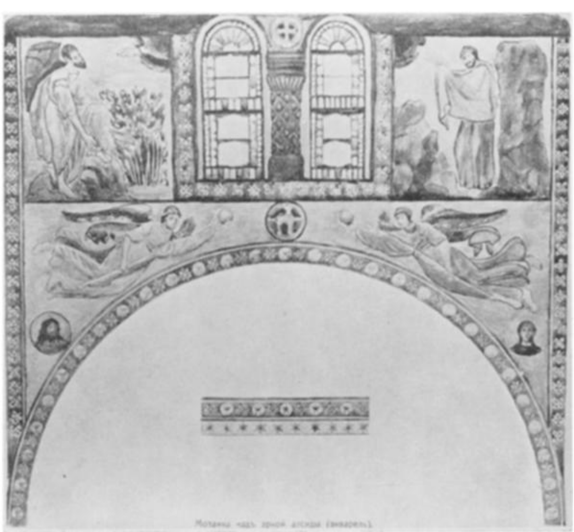


FIG. 9. Mosaic above the apse. After Beneševič, 1925.



FIG. 10. Mosaic. Before conservation and cleaning, 1958.

some time, since an earlier restorer had already tried to remedy the situation by fastening iron bars, arranged cross-wise, over the most endangered spots of the surface. After this rather disheartening analysis of the state of preservation by Paul Underwood,[15] Director of the Byzantine Institute of America, our expedition was fortunate to be able to engage the services of Ernest Hawkins, the experienced restorer of the mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, for the purpose of refastening the loosened area of the mosaic.

In more than fifty spots (fig. 11) a handful of cubes were temporarily removed so that the restorers could get behind the detached surface and pour in new binding materials. In some areas they inserted copper clamps into the wall (which in this case does not consist of bricks, as in a normal Byzantine church, but granite blocks). Then the cubes were set back in place, not only in their original location, but also in the same profile, since in a good mosaic every cube is set at a slightly different angle in order to produce a diffused reflection of the light. Only after having consolidated the mosaic could the rather disturbing iron crosses safely be removed.

The second fact established by the close inspection was that the mosaic was covered by heavy layers of dirt, varnish and a kind of glue. They had contributed not only to a darkening but in many spots also to a discoloring of the cubes. Moreover, the deposits were so thick that the original design was in many areas obscured. Once

[14] For a general report on this expedition *cf.* G. H. Forsyth, "Island of Faith in the Sinai Wilderness" and K. Weitzmann, "Mount Sinai's Holy Treasures," *National Geographic* No. 125 (1964): pp. 82 ff. and 107 ff. (here one finds the first color reproduction of the mosaic after its cleaning).

[15] Our expedition has been very grateful to Professor Underwood for coming to Sinai, giving us advice on all technical aspects of the mosaic, for making Mr. Hawkins available to us from Istanbul, and for helping to raise the funds for cleaning the mosaic, an unforeseen task of our expedition.



FIG. 11. Mosaic. Detail immediately after conservation.

more we were able to engage Mr. Hawkins who, with some assistants, cleaned the mosaic (fig. 12) [16] in the same painstaking manner which he has developed over the years during his work in Hagia Sophia. Using no chemicals, but scraping the surface with delicate dentist's tools, the cleaning is a very slow process, and while all important areas have been very thoroughly cleaned, others of lesser importance could still be scraped a bit further. Nevertheless, the general impression is that of a freshness of color that hardly could be any different from what it was in the time of Justinian.

Twice the mosaic was subjected to extensive photographing of a great many details by and under the supervision of Mr. Fred Anderegg from the University of Michigan,[17] the first time before we had decided on the cleaning, and the second time afterwards. However, it must be made clear that the photos of the cleaned mosaic (fig. 13) which were made with the help of rather strong electrical lamps, show the colors much lighter than they are meant to be seen under conditions of daylight or candlelight. The gold cubes were intended to glow in the somewhat dimmed interior of a church, rather than to glitter like crystals, and the colors of the flesh and garments look deeper and warmer in natural light than under the electrical lamps. Yet the relative values and the refined color scale can be fully appreciated for the first time under both conditions.

The third important result of the thorough study is the realization, as unexpected as it is gratifying, that the mosaic is in almost perfect condition. In going over the surface of the mosaic inch by inch, no trace of a later resetting of cubes could be detected anywhere. The only restoration we know of is recorded by an inscription on two marble



FIG. 12. Mosaic in the process of cleaning.

[16] Working from the scaffold is Mr. Carroll Wales, who not only assisted in cleaning the mosaic, but also started the even bigger undertaking of cleaning the icons.

[17] His assistant was Mr. John Galey from Basel, who also photographed the major part of the icon collection.



FIG. 13. Mosaic. After cleaning, 1960.



Fig. 14. Mosaic. Moses receiving the tablets of the Law.

tablets left and right of the little apse mosaic in the adjoining chapel of the Burning Bush. It refers to the restoration of this mosaic, as well as the great mosaic in the Church proper, by the Russian monk Samuel at the time of Archbishop Constantinos of Byzantium in the year 1847.[18] The only traces of restoration of the great mosaic visible today are fillings with plaster on which cubes are imitated by a brush. Fortunately, such areas are small and occur nearly always in relatively unimportant spots as, e.g., over the head of Christ, where a hook had been fastened for the hanging of a lamp. If we are not mistaken, there practically had never been a cube reset. Two fortunate circumstances contribute to this state: first that the climatic conditions were favorable for the mosaic's preservation; and second that, in the remote wilderness of Sinai, a workshop for major repairs could not easily be set up. If one remembers how often the mosaics of Ravenna have been restored, one will appreciate all the more that the Sinai mosaic is the best preserved one from the Early Byzantine period we have today.

In the light of our current knowledge of the mosaic's preservation, Kondakov's verdict that large areas of the upper region of the mosaic were grossly restored in later centuries needs correction.

III

With the full evidence finally revealed, a new investigation of its iconography and its style was called for.

Out of the many and complex iconographical problems which the mosaic poses, I should like to confine myself to two, both of which are related to points touched upon previously. It will be remembered that Kondakov stressed the point that the tablets in the hands of Moses had rounded tops and therefore he considered them to be a late form. It is psychologically interesting that various artists, independent of each other, drew the tablets in a similar fashion, because each one of them had been unable to distinguish clearly this detail so high up on the wall. They all drew from memory what they felt ought to be there. Actually there are no tablets at all. The mosaic artist had reinterpreted them in the terms of his own contemporary writing materials and designed a closed scroll, meant to be of parchment (fig. 14). This is made clear by the curving of the lower end and the shading which gives the object a three-dimensional appearance.

The mosaic is by no means a unique case where the tablets of the law were represented in the form of a scroll. In a miniature of the Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes that belongs to an eleventh-century manuscript of the Sinai library, and quite likely was made at Sinai (fig. 15),[19] the shape of the scroll is even more explicit.

The second iconographic instance involves a problem of basic significance. When one deals with iconography—and this holds true for Byzantine art more than the art of any other culture—one has to realize that the artist was advised by a learned cleric who tried to make a composition in an apse, the focal point of the Church, as meaning-



Fig. 15. Sinai Cod. 1186 Fol. 101^{v}: Moses receiving the tablets of the Law.

[18] Τὸ *παρὸν μωσίον καθὼς καὶ τὸ ἔν τῶ θυσιαστηρίω τῆς μεγάλης ἐκκλησίας πεπαλαιωθέντα ἐπιδιορθώθησαν* Αρχι-*επισκοποῦντος τοῦ* Παναγιωτάτου Κ: Κωνσταντίνου Βυζαν(*τίου*) *διὰ χειρῶν* Σαμουὴλ ʽΙερομον(αχου) *τοῦ ἐκ* Ρωσσίας 1847, Rabino, *op. cit.*, p. 32, 105 No. 64.

[19] K. Weitzmann, *Die Byzantinische Buchmalerei des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1935), pp. 58 ff. and pl. LXV, 391.

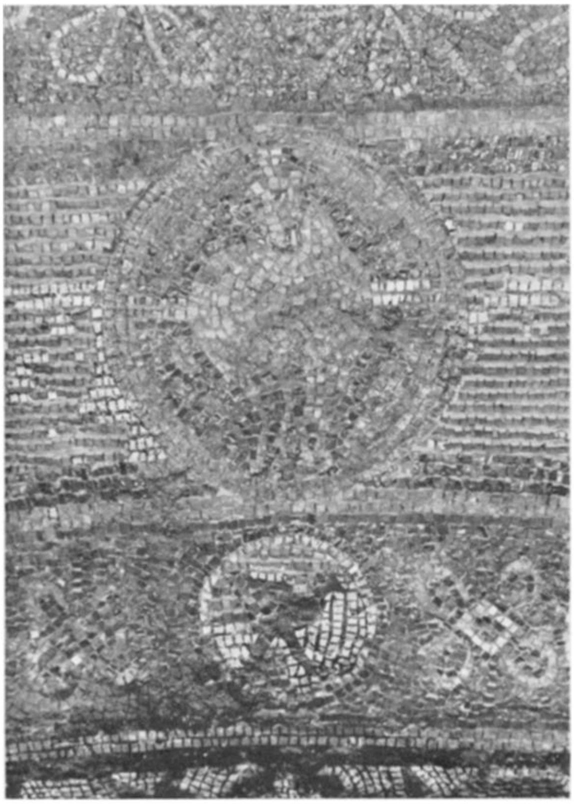


FIG. 16. Mosaic. Lamb of God. Before cleaning.

ful as possible by going beyond the literary, narrative depiction of a Christological event, and superimposing various additional layers of meaning which would reinforce the faith of the devout, as well as appeal to the learned.

As mentioned earlier there is in the summit of the triumphal arch a disk with the Lamb of God (fig. 16) in a place which earlier drawings showed as blank (fig. 3) or filled with a simple cross (fig. 5*a*) or a petalled rosette (fig. 6). The first picture to show the Lamb is the watercolor in Beneševič (fig. 9), though here it is drawn in profile, while in reality it is very elegantly rendered in a three-quarter pose with the head turned around so as to fit into the circle. After cleaning (fig. 17), the Lamb stands out clearly and behind it is a golden cross set against a background of three concentric circles of different shades of blue.

This tripartite blue ground suggests the connotation of the Trinity and this interpretation holds the key to a better understanding of one of the layers of meaning, going beyond the mere narrative of the main theme, the Transfiguration. As the Lamb of God, "—as it had been slain," to use the phrase of the Apocalypse—reminded the beholder of the Eucharistic sacrifice and therewith the human nature of Christ, so does the Trinitarian symbol allude to the divine nature. In this way, the disk with the Lamb becomes a symbolic representation of the dogma of the Two Natures of Christ as it had been formulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

In the apse (fig. 13) below the Lamb and above the head of Christ, the disk with a golden cross upon the tripartite blue circles is repeated, but without the Lamb. Here it is juxtaposed to the medallion in the center of the lower border, which depicts David wearing a purple chlamys and a crown, like a Byzantine emperor. The location of David under the feet of Christ must be understood as an allusion to the geneology of Christ ("Born of the seed of David according to the flesh" [Romans I:*13*]) and thus to His human nature. The two medallions of the Cross and David are, therefore, another pictorialization of the Two Nature doctrine. This also explains why the subject of the Transfiguration of Christ was chosen for the central place in the decoration of the



FIG. 17. Mosaic. Lamb of God. After cleaning.



FIG. 18. Mosaic. Daniel.

Church. Could there be a better demonstration of the Two Nature dogma than Christ changing from the human nature into the divine and back into the human before the eyes of the three apostles who had accompanied Him to the Mount of Tabor?

But the Lamb of God, being in the center of the triumphal arch, must also, and even primarily, be considered in relation to the other elements of this arch. Two archangels are flying towards the Lamb, offering to it, i.e., to Christ, orb and scepter as symbols of world rulership, just as flying Victories had brought the same attributes to the Roman emperor on marble triumphal arches. Below in the spandrels are two medallion heads, interpreted traditionally, as already mentioned, as those of Justinian and Theodora. While scholarship from the very beginning objected to this identification, it was Usov [20] who, as far back as 1879, had already proposed what must be considered the correct answer, namely that the bearded head with the somewhat dishevelled hair represents John the Baptist and the woman in the purple paenula, the Virgin. He even had already the clear idea that they belong to a so-called Deesis in which the Virgin and John the Baptist are related to Christ in their role as intercessors. Kondakov, accepting Usov's identification of the medallions, nevertheless objected to the idea of a Deesis, because, so he argues, the Deesis does not exist before the eleventh century.[21] Usov had made only one mistake, namely that of relating the two medallions to the Christ in the mandorla instead of to the Christ in the form of a Lamb.

The Deesis is a pictorialization of the prayer of intercession in the liturgy, a prayer in which the Virgin and John the Baptist are followed, in the hierarchical order, by the archangels. Thus, the angels of the mosaic who pay homage to the Lamb are part of the same liturgical ensemble, and the whole triumphal arch forms a liturgical unity.

It cannot be our aim in the present context to explain fully the program of the mosaic, which involves still further layers of meaning. Our pur-



FIG. 19. Mosaic. Matthew.

[20] Usov, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[21] Kondakov, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

pose is simply to demonstrate that the full recognition and interpretation of the Lamb within the Trinitarian disk holds the key for the analysis of the mosaic along the lines of the dogma of the Two Natures of Christ and the liturgical prayer of the Intercession.

IV

Through a whole century the discussion of the mosaic had been confined almost exclusively to the realm of iconography; style was mentioned only to the extent that earlier scholarship dealt with the problem of what was old and what was presumably restored. Hardly anything, understandably, had been said about the artistic quality of the mosaic, and so far as modern scholarship touched upon it prior to the cleaning, it stressed a rather provincial quality. Now that we have the full evidence, we are led to a rather different conclusion.

We shall try to demonstrate that we are dealing, in fact, with an artist capable of a wide range of expression and of great subtlety. A comparison of a few faces will make this clear. The youthful



FIG. 20. Mosaic. Portrait of John, the Deacon. Before cleaning.



FIG. 21. Mosaic. Portrait of John, the Deacon. After cleaning.

Daniel in Persian costume (fig. 18) is unemotional and conventional, while the apostle Matthew (fig. 19) is a character head of an energetic old man who looks straight into the eyes of the beholder. In the case of a representation of a then-living person (with a square nimbus) [22] like John the Deacon, apparently one of the two donors (fig. 20), the artist is quite capable, where he so desires, of giving his creation portrait-like features. The design, not clearly recognizable before the cleaning, has come out after it (fig. 21) with great precision, revealing an ascetic and at the same time intelligent face, with a high degree of consciousness expressed in the searching eyes. It has repeatedly been suggested that this head might represent John Climacus, who became one of the best known abbots of Sinai and the writer of the *Scala Paradisi,* the famed manual for a monk's conduct, but there is no way of giving any support to this identification.

Still another mode of expression may be seen in the head of John the Baptist (fig. 22). Only after

[22] For the square nimbus *cf.* G. Ladner, "The So-called Square Nimbus," *Mediaeval Studies* **3** (1941): pp. 15 ff.



FIG. 22. Mosaic. John the Baptist. Before cleaning.

the cleaning (fig. 23) could the great pathos fully be appreciated, a pathos achieved by the oblique eyes and the even more oblique eyebrows. The eyes are unusually deep-set in the sockets which, I believe, can best be explained by the use of a tragic mask from classical antiquity as model.[23] A comparison with a theatrical mask from Pompeii explains not only the characteristic treatment of the eyes but also the great mass of hair, resembling the onkos. This is a clear example of how deeply the mosaic artist is still steeped in the classical past when he wants to make use of it—not for mere formal reasons but in order to express with such a traditional pathos-formula the tragic nature of John the Baptist.



FIG. 23. Mosaic. John the Baptist. After cleaning.

A fifth mode, which forms the greatest possible contrast to the preceding one, was used by the mosaic artist in depicting the Virgin (fig. 24) opposite John the Baptist. In the case of the Virgin, the most abstract forms, almost geometrical in the design of the eyes and eyebrows, and strict frontality and symmetry are the means utilized to deprive the face of any kind of human emotion. In view of the artist's capability to play all registers



FIG. 24. Mosaic. Virgin.

of expressions, this can only be understood as a deliberate intention aiming, if we are not mistaken, at the expression of the Divine by the absence of the Human. This juxtaposition of the Divine and the Human also dominates the core of the Transfiguration, i.e., Christ and the two prophets (fig. 13). The most abstract face in the whole mosaic is that of Christ and, in conformity with it, the body is dematerialized by flattening out the garment and by depicting a stance which does not suggest any distribution of weight. In strong contrast, both prophets flanking Christ show a more human expression in their faces, which reflect a consciousness of observing, out of the corners of

[23] K. Weitzmann, "The Classical in Byzantine Art as a Mode of Individual Expression" in: *Byzantine Art—An European Art,* Lectures given on the occasion of the 9th Exhibition of the Council of Europe, Athens 1966, p. 172 and figs. 132 and 134.

their eyes, the transfigured Christ with whom they speak, as indicated by the lively gesture of their raised hands. Moreover, the bodies, standing firmly on the ground, reveal a greater plasticity and with it a sense of a higher degree of physical reality.

At the same time, the artist distinguishes between the calm expression in the face of Moses and the highly emotional one of Elijah. A very similar distinction prevails between the two kneeling disciples. But here it is the figure at the left, John, who, like Moses at the upper right, has the quiet features and the one at the right, James, who matches Elijah at the upper left in the high pitch of emotion. Clearly the artist uses the device of a chiasm in order to create a subtle balance. Obviously, the master who designed the mosaic is as talented in laying out a monumental, hieratic composition as he is capable of a lively treatment of the individual figures. We cannot say with certainty where this artist came from, but there is a high degree of probability that he came from Constantinople, first of all because the capital had a world-wide fame with regard to its mosaic workshops, whose artists had been called to Damascus, Toledo, Kiev, Norman Sicily, Venice, and other places wherever an ambitious project of mosaic decoration was commissioned. Moreover, one always has to be aware that the monastery at Sinai was founded by decree of Justinian and thus enjoyed the patronage of this great emperor, whose fame rests to a large extent on his architectural and artistic enterprises.

Since all figurative mosaics before the outbreak of iconoclasm in A.D. 726 were destroyed in Constantinople and most of the Byzantine empire, the Sinai mosaic is the only one preserved from the Justinianic age which can be attributed to a pure Byzantine atelier, in distinction from the better-known mosaics in Ravenna, which are a mixture of Byzantine and Italian style. There is no other mosaic in existence as unspoiled in its unadulterated purity and as revealing of the original intentions of a great mosaicist of the Justinianic period as is the Transfiguration mosaic on Mount Sinai.[24]

[24] A fuller argument favoring the Justinianic date of the Sinai mosaic and its execution by Constantinopolitan artists will be published in the forthcoming text of volume I of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria expedition: G. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann "The Church and Fortress of Justinian" (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1966). The photographs of the figs. 10–24 were made by the photographers of the Alexandria–Michigan–Princeton Expedition to Mount Sinai and I wish to extend to them my sincere thanks for devoted service.